

A review leading to the conferment of a Doctor of Arts degree in the field of the arts, in the discipline of fine arts and art conservation to Kate Ngan Wa Ao.

Review of Kate's Ngan Wa Ao doctoral work

A net woven from thousands of plastic slide mounts evokes a sense of emptiness while hinting at an intangible presence. Their repetition and modular structure lend the work a minimalist aesthetic, yet the installation radiates a calm, personal quality. It's unclear whether these fragile, malleable curtains conceal or reveal something.

They float gently in open space. The frames are loosely connected, allowing subtle movement and flexibility. They can separate into smaller sections or expand into larger structures, gently swaying and bending in response to our presence as we walk among them. Touched or nudged, they emit a soft rattle—a whispered and partial memory? Each frame bears traces of its past—scratches, marks, or handwritten notes—implying thousands of unseen slides or endless, imagined ones. Although seemingly identical, every empty frame maintains a distinct, tangible presence that resonates with both absence and memory.

By de-framing her photographs, Kate Ngan Wa Ao literally and metaphorically frees them from traditional borders. The once-invisible frame becomes the focal point: a “placeholder for vernacular life” and a “box of memory”. Multi-colored frames—predominantly grey and white—arrange themselves into pixel-like patterns. When blurred by our gaze, they form screens that might generate any image we imagine, from the past, present, or future.

De-Framed opens a space for our own projections, prompting us to question what remains when photographs are removed. These latticed nets become both physical and mental constructs, evoking a sense of loss and possibility. The grid of empty frames functions like an open archive into which our individual memories and projections can fall. Wandering among them shifts our perspective: edges align or diverge, revealing new rhythms. We transition from passive viewers to active participants, recognising that form, concept, and our own presence shape the artwork's meaning.

By dismantling and erasing the images, Kate Ao approaches vernacular photographs from a new vantage point. In this active process—removing the film from 3,265 slides, then linking the empty frames with metal rings inserted through pre-drilled holes—one by one, hour after hour, she performs a meticulous, near-meditative ritual. Each step extends beyond merely de-framing, prompting a fresh reflection on the medium itself. As she wrote in her theoretical work, the process

echoes the manual intensity of analog photography—loading film, developing negatives, and printing in the darkroom. It also entails the reverse of that experience, a counterpoint to our everyday habit of endlessly accumulating new images.

In her practice, Kate Ao explores the enduring presence of photographs beyond the disappearance of their original content. Acts of erasure within her work do not signal loss, but rather generate new meanings and relational dynamics between the viewer, the image, and the medium itself. She works at the boundaries of photographic materiality, challenging traditional assumptions and reconfiguring its perceptual boundaries. What begins as a personal archive of photographs is transformed into a collection of objects with ambiguous, shifting identities—neither wholly image nor entirely material.

Ao's methodology merges photographic surfaces with diverse substances such as glue, gypsum, cement, silicon and wax. A personal gesture—an almost performative engagement—forms an integral part of the process. She formulates and transforms materials that resist permanence, instead embracing states of flux and transience.

This conceptual and material approach is exemplified in the installation *New Ways of Old Seeing*, which extends low along the walls of the gallery, and is composed of tile-sized, interconnected rectangular objects. Initially, the work is felt more than seen—spreading like a structure in progress, quietly enveloping an empty space. Rather than mounted on the wall as conventional photographs, the pieces rise from the floor, emphasizing construction and the enclosure of space. In doing so, she underscores the evolving nature of the objects themselves—caught in constant transformation, that functions as their afterlives.

The individual objects also recall Inuit snow goggles, originally devised to shield the eyes from the sun's sharp reflection on ice and snow. Like the goggles they reference, Ao's pieces feature narrow slits rather than open apertures. As we look at them, we instinctively squint, while multiple apertures seem to gaze back—hinting at a gentle, even languid, sense of being observed. Reminiscent also of domestic tiles, they quietly fill the room with “masks of gazes”, echoing how vernacular photographs blend into everyday life.

For this work, Kate Ngan Wa Ao prints personal images from her digital archive onto photographic paper, then meticulously removes the pigment layer. This process uncovers the underlying substrate, reducing each image to tiny, fragmented remnants—effectively turning them into dust. Through scratching and melting, new shapes emerge, stretching more conventional ideas of what a photograph can be. This dynamic act of deconstruction compels her to reconsider these images as everyday memories, highlighting both their fragility and their potential for transformation.

In her exploration of wax, Ao draws on its deep historical role in the preservation of memory, specifically referencing *imagines*—the Roman funerary masks pressed onto the faces of the deceased. These masks served as tangible connections between the living and the dead, resisting the erasure of time. Her wax goggles, reminiscent of photographs, respond to light and temperature: they can shield the eyes from intense light, yet will begin to melt when exposed to it. Though they share muted tones of white, yellow, and green, each piece reveals its own distinctive hue, drawn from the fragments of photographs embedded in the wax. These colorful fragments of vernacular imagery slowly emerge, growing from the wax like something organic—like lichen on a wall—suggesting the objects are in a constant state of transformation. The fusion of wax and photographic remnants explores the porous boundary between loss and preservation.

Ao's approach revolves around a cyclical process of damage and repair, a dialectic that has shaped her work since the beginning of her studies in the Photography Department. This cycle is both personal and theoretical, intertwining the medium's instability with her own lived experience. One of the earliest and most formative moments in her practice stems from childhood, witnessing her mother tear up and destroy photographs of her absent father. This act of erasure and grief became a point of origin for 半 (*bàn*) / *Half*, an earlier piece exploring familial absence and archival fragmentation.

In *Half*, a tall, vertically oriented sculpture is embedded into the wall, resembling an architectural incision. From afar, it appears as though the wall has been violently cut with a blunt instrument. Upon closer inspection, the jagged edge is composed of torn and layered ID photographs—these are multiple and identical portraits of her father. Each image has been individually torn and stacked, forming a textured seam that partially reveals fragments of his gaze. This act of repetition and rupture creates a physical manifestation of a person whose presence was always partial, always fractured.

Opposite this work, a video projection focuses on close-up footage of the artist's mother's hands. As she speaks about Ao's father, subtle shifts—tremors, pauses, gestures—betray an emotional undercurrent. The mother's hands, searching for composure, become a counterpoint to the torn photographic edge, producing a quiet yet potent emotional resonance across the space.

This interplay between materiality and memory recurs in *Wa Wa, We Have To Go*, where Ao cast a concrete slab and printed family photographs directly onto its surface. She then shattered the slab and reassembled the fragments. This purposeful act of breaking and rebuilding creating a tension between permanence and fragility. Within the crushed surface, faint images of smiling children hint at autobiographical traces, suggesting that identity can persist—however distorted—through rupture. The reconstructed debris becomes more than just a site of loss; it is a structure in transition, pointing toward continuity through fragmentation.

Ao's material choices—rough, sharp, sticky, or unstable—are not incidental but integral to her interrogation of photographic boundaries. She engages with the medium experimentally, responding to its physicality both instinctively and also through deep reflection. Anonymous vernacular images, acquired from flea markets, become pliable and animate—less like static documents and more like living organisms.

In the series *Where Will They Live?*, a sense of organic instability becomes tangible. The photographs bulge, wrinkle, and collapse inward—stretching and contracting like membranes. They shift in color, appear sticky, and emit a volatile energy. By burning and distorting these images, Ao temporarily revives the frozen moments embedded within them. Flames animate memory, transforming the archival into the alchemical—before it solidifies once again. The altered slides—small enough to fit in one's hand—become three-dimensional objects that fray and bend, as if slowly annihilating the images and worlds they contain. Kate Ao then transforms them into large prints, revealing every detail and emphasizing the process of transformation—inviting us to more closely confront their vanishing spaces.

This transformative process draws on the tradition of *ZhiZha*—the ritualistic burning of objects to transport them into the afterlife—which was part of Ao's upbringing. Her image archive spans photographic prints and positive films from the 1920s to the 1980s, many bearing handwritten annotations—intimate remnants of previous lives. These unknowns—these gaps in authorship, context, and narrative—seem to form the conceptual core of her practice. In Ao's hands, they become raw material for a new kind of afterlife: one in which the photographic object is not merely preserved, but reimaged.

Kate Ngan Wa Ao's doctoral research offers a profound and original view on vernacular photography, blending theoretical inquiry with experimental artistic practice. Her central intervention—employing destruction as an artistic methodology—reframes vernacular photography not as a fixed category or historical artifact, but as an evolving medium. Her approach not only challenges the traditional hierarchies of photographic value but also expands the discursive field around the everyday image in the context of cultural memory, identity, and technological transformation.

The thesis moves beyond the aesthetic or archival valuation of vernacular photographs, instead highlighting their fluid meanings and multiple “afterlives”. Drawing from a wide array of thinkers—Joanna Zylińska, Geoffrey Batchen, Roland Barthes, and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, among others, and artists from Milan Knížák to Fluxus and the Dadaists—Ao bridges personal, cultural, and philosophical terrain. She positions photography as a living medium shaped by cycles of use, reinterpretation, and loss. She makes a compelling argument that destruction is not negation but transformation: by burning, disassembling, or embedding photographs into new materials, she uncovers latent meanings and enables renewed forms of engagement.

Crucially, Ao critiques the conventional language often applied to vernacular images—terms such as “ordinary” or “orphaned”—revealing the implicit assumptions embedded within them. She resists metaphors that frame such photographs as passive or inferior and instead reveals their ongoing cultural agency. Her substitution of “everyday” for “ordinary” is not merely semantic, it signals a deeper reorientation of how we can understand value, memory, and historical context within the visual field.

By reflecting on emerging technologies and the role of AI and mixed reality—especially their dependence on vernacular image datasets—Ao frames photography not as a medium of the past, but as central to the visual future. Her critical approach resists both technological determinism and nostalgia, calling instead for conscious participation in an evolving image culture. The metaphor of the Ouroboros—photography consuming and regenerating itself—is particularly effective in articulating the cyclical nature of visual production.

Kate Ao’s doctoral work excels in its ability to hold tension—between memory and loss, between material presence and emptiness, between personal archives and collective meaning, and between the individual and the social. It acknowledges photography’s emotional weight while simultaneously subjecting it to a slow and deliberate unraveling.

In sum, this doctoral work demonstrates exceptional theoretical and practical sophistication, sensitivity, and methodological innovation. It positions vernacular photography not as an afterthought of art history, but as a powerful, shape-shifting medium at the heart of our cultural present and future.

Artistic and Pedagogical Achievements

Kate Ngan Wa Ao, a native of Macao currently based in Norway, is a dedicated artist whose practice is marked by a conscientious, mature, and exploratory approach to both art and education. Her achievements span solo and group exhibitions, film screenings, residencies, public talks, awards, and teaching engagements—each reflecting a deep commitment to socially and politically engaged artistic practice.

Ao has presented an extensive portfolio of solo exhibitions across Asia and Europe. These include *Where Will They Live?* at Centrum Kultury i Sztuki in Konin (2022) and at the Wojewódzka Biblioteka Publiczna i Centrum Animacji Kultury in Poznań (2022), *Bieguny. Dialogi Młodych 3: Inny* at Galeria Miejska Arsenal in Poznań (2020), *(Ban) / Half* at SKALA Gallery in Poznań (2019), *C – P ≠ M* and *Falling From the Land* at the BOK Festival in Macau (2020), *Slender Grace*, part of the Women Art Series at At Light Gallery in Macau (2018), *Beautiful Men* at Inkubator

Kultury Pireus in Poznań (2018), *Living Souls* at CYCU Art Center in Taiwan (2016) and Yunyi Arts & Cultural Communications Association in Macau (2015).

In parallel, she has participated in numerous group exhibitions from 2015 to 2024, presenting work across institutional and independent platforms internationally. Highlights from 2024 include *Shed* at Galeria Czas Kobiet in Poznań, *We'll Hold a Wedding on Your Graves* at the Copenhagen Photo Festival in Denmark, and *Under Erasure* at Łęctwo Gallery in Poznań. In 2023, she participated in *Let It Shine* at Veba Archives, Miejski Ośrodek Sztuki in Gorzów, *Hvitsten Salong* in Norway, and *Body Ballade* at Ox Warehouse in Macau. Earlier exhibitions include *ZOOM* at Galeria Czarna, CSW Solvay in Kraków (2022), *One-Off Moving Image Festival* in Valencia, Spain, *Dotyku! Scena Otwarta* in Poznań (2021), *New Promised Land* at Mong-Ha Villas in Macau, *I Will Be Your Image* at TIFF Festival in Wrocław, and the *Women Artists International Biennial of Macau* at ALBERGUE SCM (2020).

Her work has also been featured in key group exhibitions such as *ARTAGON LIVE* in Paris, *Mesh* at Polonez, *Hands Up Who Wants to Die?! in Szczecin*, *We Are Enough Already, Made In. Between* at R20 Gallery in Poznań, and the *OFF Festival* in Bratislava (2019). In 2018, she exhibited in *Palcem w Oko* in Gorzów, *Out of Place* and *Re-prezentacja* in Poznań, and *Photobook* at the Athens Photo Festival. That same year included participation in *Festival Ireneusza Zjeżdżałki, Artagon.IV – Heading East* in Paris, and *OFF Festival* in Bratislava. Earlier, in 2017, her projects were presented in *Sen Astronoma* at Poznań Observatory, *Made In. Between* at Galeria R20, and *BOOKi – Studying Photobook* at SKALA. In 2015, she also participated in the *ART VENICE COLLECTIVE* at ALBERGUE SCM in Macau.

Beyond art exhibitions, Kate has produced a strong body of moving image work, which has been showcased in international film festivals. In 2024, her films were screened at the Macao Experimental Film Festival at SiFang Art Space. In 2023, she was featured at the Silhouette Festival in Paris and at the Macao Films Panorama hosted by the Oriental Foundation. In 2022, her work was presented at the Macau Youth Film Festival at Cinemateca Paixão, *Local View Power* at the Macau Cultural Centre, and the London International Monthly Film Festival.

Her engagement with artistic research and international exchange is further demonstrated through her participation in residencies. In 2023, she was selected for the Hvitsten Residency organized by Safemuse in Norway and the Revolv Residency with the Revolv Collective in London.

Kate's public speaking practice includes artist talks and academic dialogues. In 2024, she was invited to speak at *Post-Migrant Eastern Europe*, hosted by the European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture in Berlin. In 2023, she gave an *Artist Talk* during Hvitsten Salong in Norway. Previous talks include a 2022 presentation at the Magdalena Abakanowicz University of the Arts in Poznań

and a 2021 discussion titled *Identity as a Social Construct*, delivered as part of the *Artysta – Artist – Künstler – художник* series at OP ENHEIM in Wrocław.

Her work has been recognized with several awards. In 2022, she was awarded third place in the Vintage Grand Prix Contest organized by Fundacja Fotografistka in Bydgoszcz, received an Honorable Mention for Best Short Film at the London International Monthly Film Festival, and was officially selected for the *First-Time Filmmaker Sessions* by Lift-Off Global Network. In 2021, her film received an award in the *Local View Power – Freshman Documentary* category in Macau. She was also granted a Special Mention at the *Blurring the Lines* showcase in Paris in 2020.

Kate's contribution to the field of art education and promotion is ongoing. Between 2022 and 2023, she served as a teaching assistant in English-language seminars led by Dr. Paul Magee at the Magdalena Abakanowicz University of the Arts in Poznań. In 2022, she conducted a workshop titled *Family Albums*, organized by the Triennale Rysunku Wrocław, and participated in two international training programs: *Expanded View of Printmaking* and *Emancipatory Tendencies in the Art of Polish Contemporary Women Artists*.

Her curatorial and organizational work includes serving as assistant programmer for the 4th, 5th, and 6th editions of the Macao International Documentary Film Festival (2021–2023). She also curated and organized the *New Promised Land* exhibition in 2020 at Comuna de Han-Ian in Macau, and in 2019, co-organized two events in Poznań: *Politics, Spiritualism, and Sexuality – Based in Macau* at Ostrov, and *Macao in Motion: City and Cinema under Influences*, a screening series held at Kino Malta.

Conclusion

De-Framed and *New Ways of Old Seeing* are constructed through acts of erasure and transformation. In these works, vernacular photographs are stripped of their stable carriers of meaning, becoming instead mutable spaces of interaction and imagination. Through cycles of deconstruction—such as erasing, scraping, and melting—Ao releases photography from its traditional constraints. In her objects, photography transforms into living matter: a sticky substance, an ephemeral trace, or even a palpable absence. The permanent becomes fragile and fluid. Stillness gives way to movement. Looking is accompanied by *un-looking*, and the entire experience is received in a multisensory way. Her photographic objects and installations provoke questions about where the true essence of photography lies—in its visual representation, emotional resonance, or material presence.

Ao's research combines deep theoretical reflection with material experimentation, challenging dominant assumptions about the value and function of everyday images. Destruction in her work is

not reductive, but transformative—an act of dismantling, erasing, and reconfiguring that opens new relational spaces between image, object, and viewer.

In Ao's practice, contradictions—between loss and continuity, absence and presence, fragility and persistence—coexist both conceptually and materially. Her works are not illustrations of theory but acts of inquiry. They present photography as a porous, living form—capable of contradiction, change, and renewal.

In her theoretical research, Ao draws on the ideas of authors such as Barthes, Benjamin, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, and Zylinska, while simultaneously engaging with contemporary cultural and technological transformations. She addresses the impact of artificial intelligence, mass image production, and digital ephemerality, avoiding both nostalgia and pessimism. Instead, she proposes a new vision of vernacular photography—as a resilient, vital, and flexible form, one that derives its adaptability from its very instability.

Her artistic and pedagogical achievements reflect deep commitment and a wide-ranging international presence. Ao's solo and group exhibitions reveal a mature, self-reflective voice capable of negotiating personal and collective narratives within cultural, political, and postcolonial contexts. Her ability to move fluidly between institutional frameworks and grassroots initiatives demonstrates her adaptability and sensitivity to diverse audiences. Participation in major festivals and curated programs—as well as her curatorial and programming roles—underscores her strength not only as an artist but also as a facilitator of creative processes.

Ao views education as a form of co-authorship and knowledge exchange. She is actively involved in seminars, artist talks, and international workshops, expanding her pedagogical practice into the realm of public discourse and transnational educational programs.

The recognition she has received through awards, artistic residencies, and film selections confirms the significance and resonance of her work within the international art community. Her engagement with socially and politically urgent themes—such as migration, identity, memory, and cultural hybridity—is handled with sensitivity and intellectual depth, affirming the integrity of her practice.

Finally, Kate Ngan Wa Ao's doctoral dissertation and artistic work titled *The Afterlives of Vernacular Photographs* are the result of in-depth research that combines humanistic reflection with innovative artistic experimentation. Her inspiring artistic and pedagogical achievements constitute an original artistic accomplishment. Therefore, I strongly recommend that Kate Ngan Wa Ao be awarded the title of Doctor of Arts in the discipline of Fine Arts and Art Conservation.

Taking into account the above arguments, as well as the exceptionally high quality of her doctoral work, I recommend that it be awarded a distinction.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Diane Fiedler".

